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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 003259

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SUBJECT: CTV WORKING FOR ROSALES

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT DOWNES,
REASON 1.4 (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. The Venezuelan Workers Confederation (CTV) is bucking the abstentionist policy of its patron party, Accion Democratica (AD), and supporting the presidential campaign of consensus opposition candidate Manuel Rosales. The CTV can help staff Rosales' voter mobilization and poll watching operations, but its pro-Chavez competition, the National Workers Union (UNT) is doing the same, if not more, for the Chavez campaign. The Labor Ministry has rejected the CTV's reorganization plan, so the confederation's plans to call internal union elections are on hold. The CTV was preparing to nominate CTV President Carlos Ortega for re-election while Ortega was in jail, but will eventually have to review that decision after Ortega's August 13 prison escape (Reftel). CTV Secretary General Manuel Cova said the ex-workers who had taken over Coca-Cola processing facilities in Venezuela did not appear to have legitimate grievances.
End Summary.

CTV Backs Rosales

¶2. (C) CTV Secretary General Manuel Cova told poloff October 26 that the CTV is "almost" entirely behind consensus opposition candidate Manuel Rosales' presidential bid. The CTV Executive Board broke ranks with the abstentionist policy of the Accion Democratica (AD) Party (the party to which the CTV has been historically subordinate) when 32 out of 34 CTV executive board members voted several weeks ago to support Rosales' campaign. Cova said he is heading up the Rosales' outreach campaign to union workers and meets regularly with Rosales' closest political advisors.

¶3. (C) The CTV hopes to help staff key Rosales campaign operations, including get-out-the-vote activities, poll watching teams, and the post-election "defense" of the electoral results. Cova said his primary message to union workers is that the future of an independent trade union movement is at stake in the December 3 presidential election. Cova believes Rosales is gaining momentum, but he conceded that the opposition still needs to persuade many potential Rosales supporters to "overcome their fears" and vote.

CTV's Woes Continue

¶ 14. (C) The CTV continues to face competition from the pro-Chavez National Workers Union (UNT) and is struggling for survival. The National Electoral Council (CNE) continues to withhold certification of CTV member unions and is withholding approval of some 270 collective bargaining agreements negotiated by CTV affiliates, according to Cova. Cova also reported that the Labor Ministry rejected the CTV's internal reorganization plan, adding that he believed the Labor Ministry is seeking to begin a protracted and intrusive negotiating process with the CTV. The CTV is not playing.

¶ 15. (C) Without Labor Ministry approval for its reorganization plan, the CTV has had to defer calling internal presidential elections. Cova told poloff in early August that the CTV planned to re-nominate Carlos Ortega for re-election over the objections of a number of CTV executive board members. At that time, Ortega was serving a 16-year sentence for his role in the December 2002 to February 2003 national strike. Ortega subsequently escaped from military prison on August 13, but his whereabouts remain unknown. Cova said the CTV will eventually have to review its position to nominate Ortega for re-election.

Coca-Cola Job Action

¶ 16. (SBU) Asked about the take-over of Coca-Cola processing plants in Venezuela that started on October 24, Cova said the protesting ex-workers were a combination of formerly contracted employees who were not protected by a collective bargaining agreement or were full-time workers who already

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received due severance. Cova said the job action to extract back pay and retirement benefits from Femsa, the Mexican company that owns Coca-Cola in Venezuela, prevented CTV workers from doing their jobs at Coca-Cola facilities.

¶ 17. (SBU) Cova added that CTV workers also have some labor issues with Femsa, but is pursuing its interests in "appropriate channels" without trying to politicize labor-management relations at Coca-Cola. (Note: The National Assembly deputies who championed the takeovers brokered an end to the job action on October 27. The deputies reportedly agreed to get the National Assembly to ask the Supreme Tribunal to review lower court decisions that did not satisfy the former workers.)

Comment

¶ 18. (C) Venezuela's largest independent trade union umbrella, the CTV, is a shadow of its former self under pre-Chavez governments. Moreover, while badly divided, the pro-Chavez UNT will likely be able to mobilize as many, if not more, union workers in support of the Chavez campaign. Nevertheless, the CTV's support for opposition candidate Rosales gives his campaign a boost in two areas where it really needs help. First, the CTV's support may be helpful in persuading would be Rosales supporters to go to the polls instead of abstaining. Second, the CTV can still mobilize large numbers of people in Venezuela's urban areas. Rosales needs a significant number of trained volunteers if his campaign is going to be able to mount credible get-out-the-vote and poll watching operations.

WHITAKER